



BEST

“In their own right, they are world-class athletes. They are the best of the best.”

Using the Prusik climb, Best Ranger competitor 1LT Scott Wence attacks a 60-foot tower soldiers had to climb before rappeling down the other side.

RANGERS 2002

Story and Photos by SPC Douglas DeMaio



SFC Bruce Hoffman pulls himself across an obstacle. The demanding competition stresses contestants both physically and mentally.



Having crossed one obstacle, Hoffman confronts another — low crawling beneath a barbed-wire entanglement.

DESCENDING by parachute from a helicopter 1,500 feet above the drop zone, an Army ranger was carried into the trees by a gust of wind. He hit hard among the sharply pointed branches, and the spectators watching the Best Ranger Competition audibly reacted as they witnessed the collision.

Physical dangers exist throughout the competition, and injuries are a common occurrence. The 60-hour event hosted by Fort Benning, Ga., puts stress on the mind, joints, muscles and bones, and the injuries soon impede a competitor's will to continue. But many tolerate their injuries and continue forward.

SSG Shane Jernigan of the 6th Ranger Training Battalion, for example, suffered a broken ankle but still managed to cross the finish line. As one contender put it, "You know it's going to hurt coming into the competition, but sometimes it demands more than some participants can give."

But many of the challenges are as tough on the mind and spirit as they are on the body, said LTC David Pound, Ranger Training Brigade executive officer.

Each year the events are changed or the requirements increased specifically to challenge each competitor's mental toughness, Pound said.

"A lot of this competition is psychological," he said. "We want to throw in enough twists to take these guys out of their comfort zones."

One simple change to this year's fitness test required that competitors do sit-ups immediately following the push-up event. The change may have challenged participants physically, but it more adversely affected those who let it take them by surprise, Pound said.

The forced march was also changed. At the 21-mile mark — what many of the competitors anticipated being the finish line —

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SFC Brian Waterman and his teammate, SSG Franklin Rosario, scramble downhill as they try for the best score on the Darby Queen Course.

the march was extended an additional three miles. More than half the participants were knocked out by this one change, and only 15 of the original 47 teams remained after the march.

Suddenly, many of the lower-ranking teams had moved up in the standing simply because they had survived, said SGT Anthony Mayne, of the 3rd Bn., 75th Ranger Regiment.

“We moved up in the standings and ran our race,” he said. “We weren’t concerned about what the other teams were doing and just continued to do what we had to do.”

The march also took its toll on those survivors who had not fully recovered by the second day.

It was there that CPT Duane Patin and SSG Daniel Jenkins from the 5th Ranger Training Bn. took their lead and never looked back. On the final day, the two-man team won the 20th annual Best Ranger Competition.

For the remaining 12 teams, that final day was a struggle in which their only reward would be to say they had completed their mission.

“It feels like we accomplished something,” Mayne said. “It’s a personal achievement, but the experience is the biggest factor.”

The Army promotes the Best Ranger Competition in order to display some of the finest tactical and technical soldiers in the world, and to encourage participants to take what they’ve learned in the competition and teach it to others, Pound said.

“It highlights the best two-man-buddy teams,” Pound said. “In their own right, they are world-class athletes. They are the best of the best.” □

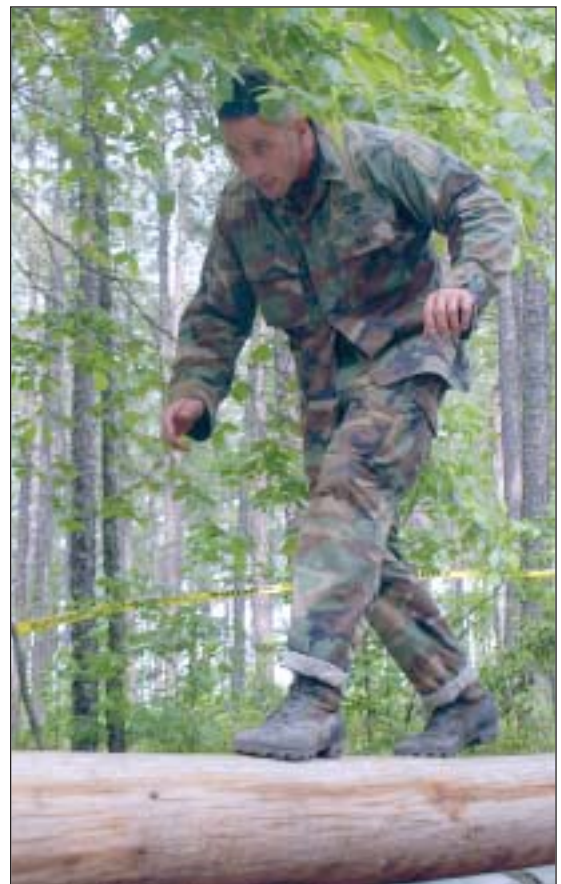


SSG Daniel Jenkins (above) and CPT Duane Patin (right) cross the finish line to win the 2002 Best Ranger Competition.





Competitors helocast from a hovering UH-60 into the Chattahoochee River on day three of the competition.



SSG James Yaw of the 6th Ranger Training Battalion performs a "balancing act" while negotiating the Darby Queen Course.



SGT Adam Reiber (*left*) and SSG Shane Jernigan carry their 300-pound equipment bag after emerging from the Chattahoochee River.

Presenting "The Best of the Best..."



Chief of Staff of the Army GEN Eric K. Shinseki poses with the winners of the 20th annual Best Ranger competition, Patin and Jenkins, after presenting the pair with their victory medals and pistols.